

Major Causes of Illness and Death

Morbidity investigations usually study disease characteristics such as the distribution of cases by diagnosis, by age and sex, by season of the year, by acute and chronic manifestations, by severity in such terms as nondisabling, disabling, confinement to bed or to a hospital, and by the case fatality.

Many health workers are interested in the illness of different groups of persons rather than in given diseases. Age groups from infancy to old age differ a great deal in their illness patterns, and this paper is an attempt to show graphically the most frequent causes of illness of varying severity and of death in each of six age periods from preschool to old age. Needless to say that the causes of illness and death differ greatly as between early infancy and old age, although these two age periods have the highest death rates.

A separation of illness into acute and chronic diseases gives a picture of moderate but declining rates of acute illness in the preschool and early school ages, and of increasingly higher rates of chronic diseases as age increases. Carried to early infancy, this situation means extremely high death rates for the very young as well as extremely high illness and death rates for the aged, whose vital organs have degenerated over the long period of continuous functioning.

The major causes of illness and death at the different ages are not discussed in this summary, but the study includes charts which illustrate the illness, hospital care, and mortality picture for each of the six ages.



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The accompanying summary covers the principal findings presented in Public Health Monograph No. 30, published concurrently with this issue of Public Health Reports. The authors are with the Division of Public Health Methods, Public Health Service.

Readers wishing the data in full may purchase copies of the monograph from the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington 25, D. C. A limited number of free copies are available to official agencies and others directly concerned on specific request to the Public Inquiries Branch of the Public Health Service. Copies will be found also in the libraries of professional schools and of the major universities and in selected public libraries.

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Collins, Selwyn D., Lehmann, Josephine L., and Trantham, Katharine S.: Major causes of illness and of death in six age periods. Public Health Monograph No. 30 (Public Health Service Publication No. 440). 22 pages. Illustrated. U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 1955. Price 25 cents.